Cops Mace Crowd At Bumbershoot

One arrest, 20 sprayed with pepper gas after Tchkung show

By Charles R. Cross

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The final evening of Bumbershoot was marred by a melée at the Seattle Center when police clashed with a crowd after a concert by the band Tchkung. What started out as the audience slowly leaving the hall turned into a violent confrontation when Seattle police arrested one man and sprayed pepper gas on 20 others. Witnesses allege police overreacted and escalated the incident by using excessive force.

Several witnesses allege that police misread the crowd and used a show of force far beyond what was necessary to get people out of the hall. As the evening went on, several other incidents followed, putting police at odds with a large angry crowd.

Unlike a highly publicized incident between police and protesters on Capitol Hill on Sept. 10, the Sept. 5 turmoil has not been widely reported. The Tchkung concert ended at 9:30 p.m. and in the half hour following the concert these incidents have been alleged:

• A 36-year-old man, Robert Cook, was repeatedly kicked by officers and was sprayed with pepper gas five times *after* he was in handcuffs and leg restraints according to Cook and members of Tchkung.

• Police used pepper gas on 19 members of the crowd outside the hall watching Cook's arrest, according to several witnesses. Some Bumbershoot attendees who were not even at the concert were hit by the spray.

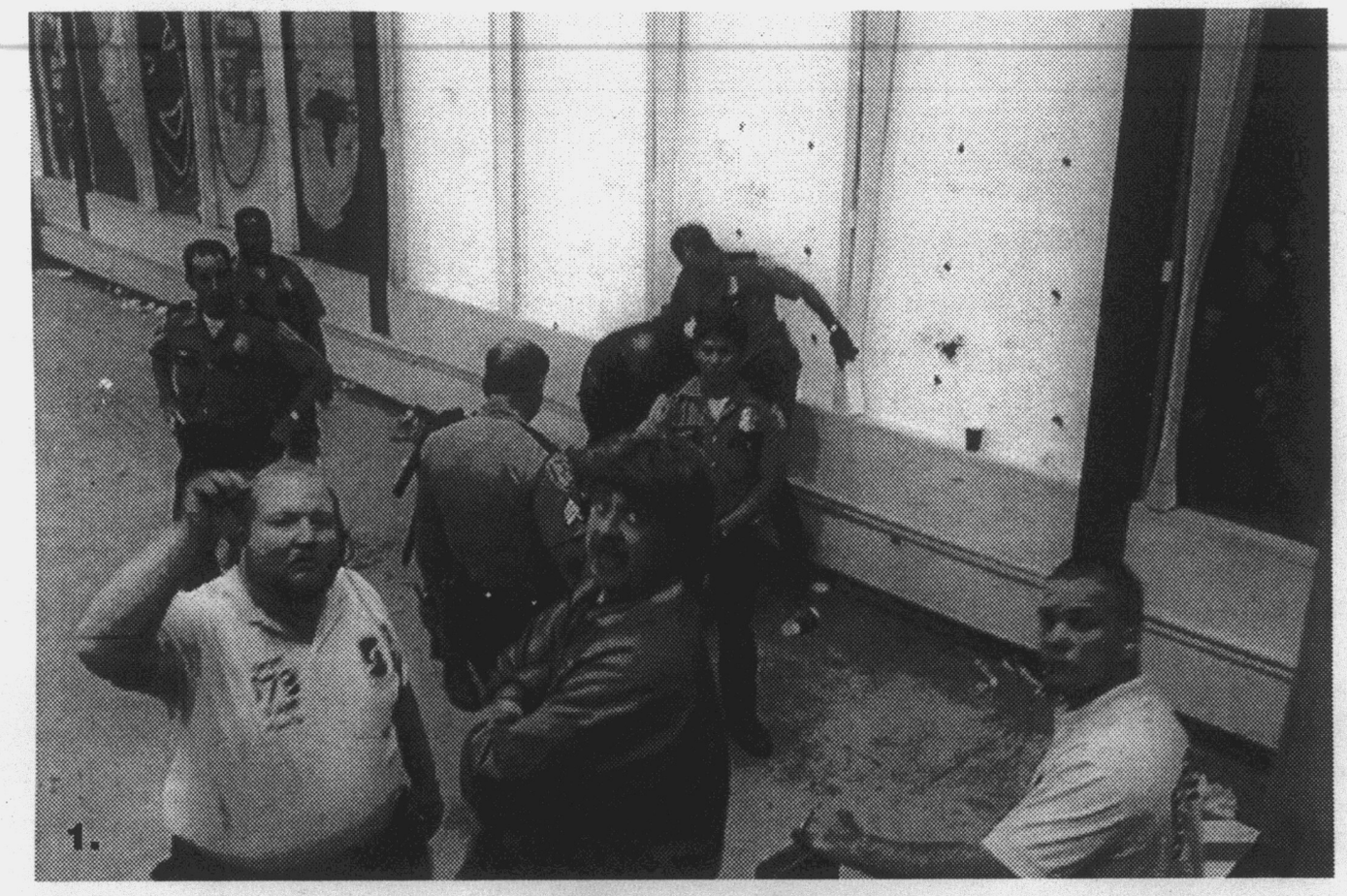
• Several minutes after the first confrontation, police used pepper gas on a teenager who was asking why they maced the crowd, according to witnesses.

• Police and security personnel demanded that no photographs be taken of the incidents and guards attempted to grab the camera of a photographer.

"The police totally lost any of the composure that they are expected to have as law enforcement officials," said Wrick Tahoma, 24, vocalist with Tchkung. "They were macing people and they grabbed this very large man by the hair, and threw him on the ground. The man had 19 police officers on him. After they put seven or eight plastic leg restraints on him—after they handcuffed him—then they maced him in the face five times and kicked him in the ribs. He kept screaming out his name and phone number and every time he did that they maced him again or kicked him. They were viscous."

The man arrested, Robert Cook, a 36-year-old self-described "street person," was charged with assault, obstructing, resisting and failure to disperse. One other suspect was also charged with harassment but escaped into the crowd and was not arrested.

Cook admits he resisted arrest but claims he had done nothing illegal prior to the police attempting to apprehend him. He says the police sprayed him with pepper gas, even after they had him on the ground in handcuffs. "I was hit repeatedly," he said. "I don't know why. I was yelling. It went on for about 15 minutes." Cook has a long history of conflicts with the Seattle Police Department.



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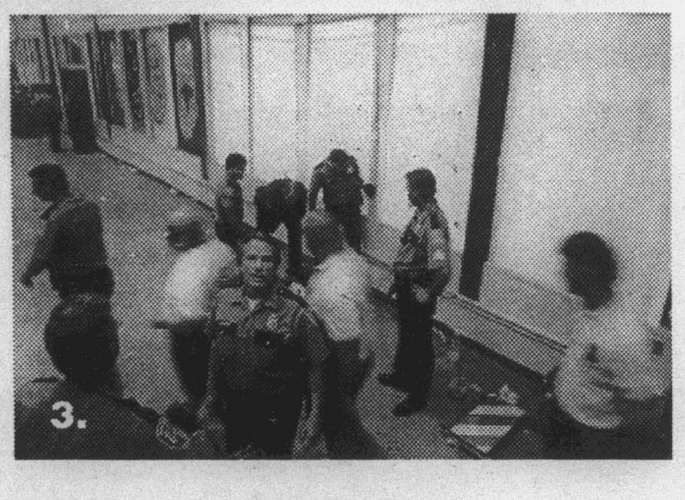

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September 5th, 9:30pm, Seattle Center Bumber Club.

The apprehension of Cook was captured in a series of startling photographs by Nick Polimenakos, Jr. "He was already handcuffed and hog-tied and he was screaming and they were pushing him around on the floor," said Polimenakos. "That's when I saw someone knock his head on the floor. He was being verbal so they had to put him in a hog-tie. But what happened after that was different. I saw the cops beating the shit out of him."

When officers observed Polimenakos taking photographs they screamed "No photos" and security tried to take his camera away. "They held me by my shirt and told me 'you can't be talking pictures here.' They were trying to take my film." Polimenakos escaped.

The Seattle Police Department's spokesperson Vinette Tichi said she was not aware of any current investigation into the incident. "If there is an allegation, " she said, "there is a complaint process and that person can call our Internal Affairs Department, as can any of the eyewitnesses, and do it anonymously or indepedent of his complaint."

Bumbershoot Director Norm Langill said the festival was looking into the incident. "I don't want this to happen again," he said. "We've never had an incident like this before." The rest of the festival was free of problems and both crowd and traffic control were improved this year according to most reviews.

The members of Tchkung cited Bumbershoot security personnel, a "peer-security" system, for their level-headedness. "The police attempted to arrest three members of the band and they maced a fourth one," said Tahoma. "I was grabbed by the police. Fortunately the stage security, who were working for Bum–bershoot, interceded and told them we were band members and they let us go."

The melee started as Tchkung were playing their final song in the Bumber Club. The band uses audience interaction and provides a drum circle made of oil barrels for the audience to drum on. The band had thrown small plastic flags into the crowd and some folks had lit those on fire in the middle of the drums, according to several concert-goers. The police told a Seattle Center official that fear the building was on fire was what sent them into the hall, a suggestion that members of Tchkung call "absurd."

"We had two free-standing oil drums, both of which had the bottom filled with sand and inside was a Folgers coffee can. In the bottom of that coffee can was a small fire. At no point was it a danger even to people sticking their hands in the drum. It was aesthetic. It was of the magnitude of a Tiki Torch."

As the concert ended, the security personnel and police stationed in the hall were joined by numerous other officers. When the crowd didn't leave the hall as fast as police wanted, they started pushing the crowd out the doors, according to Tahoma.

"People were leaving slowly," he said. "The greatest crime people were committing was dancing and drumming. Then the police immediately started yelling and shoving people and telling them to go. Some of them seemed to be in a good humor but others were definitely abusive, lacking patience. As soon as the police started shoving people, the whole vibe started to change. They grabbed [Cook] and threw him on the floor."

As the scene with Cook unfolded, a crowd gathered outside the hall and peered into the windows. Some pounded on the windows and shouted at police. After Cook was finally taken into custody the next confrontation began.

"As happens after lots of shows, there was a drum circle outside," says Chris West, 20. "The cops came out and they didn't say anything, they just started macing. They were just spraying it and walking forward. It was up my nose and down my throat."

According to West and several others, the police used pepper gas on the crowd outside the hall without warning. "I was walking through the crowd and suddenly I started choking," says Aaron Rhoton. "My eyes were burning. I saw an old couple walking by and they got maced too. It just shows how off the cops were: They maced people who weren't even at the show." Tahoma says at least 19 peo–ple were sprayed with the pepper gas.

One final incident occurred several minutes later on the other side of the Center House. "I saw this 16-year-old trying to ask this cop 'what's going on?' while jogging beside their van," says West. "And the cops wouldn't listen. The kid was saying, 'why are you doing this?' And the cops then just maced him."

One Seattle Center source, who asked not to be identified, says the incident came about because cops who normally work in a downtown strike force were called to the concert. "Somebody thought the danger was more extreme than it was," said the official. "Somebody got a hot-head and misread the situation. You go into a rock concert situation and it's easy to misread it. I think in this case the downtown squad got a little too excited."

Members of Tchkung say that the police not only misread the situation, they exasperated it. "If people are actively involved in breaking the law, there's some kind of excuse for the police to be there," Tahoma says. "At this show, the reason the crowd was so mad at the cops was because no one was doing anything wrong. There were families there with little kids, five and ten years old, who were drumming. There was absolutely no threat to police. The police were way out of line using excessive force." "The cops agitated the situation," adds West.

Tahoma says part of the reason the crowd was so angry was because they were shocked to see Seattle police be so violent. "Unlike many other cities, there's usually reason to respect the police in Seattle for their restraint," he said. "But the police blew it. That's why the crowd was so shocked. In other places you might expect it, but this came out of the blue. It was uncalled for and unexpected so people freaked. If they had behaved in a restrained manner, they could have just stood there and they would have passively cleared the field and won the day. Instead they felt they had to prove something."

Cook, meanwhile, spent two days in jail after his arrest. His case goes trial September 30. ■

PHOTOS BY NICK POLIMENAKOS JR.